

**COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION
IN EUROPE**

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December 19, 2003

The Honorable Colin L. Powell
Secretary of State
US Department of State
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Powell:

We write today again urging the designation of Uzbekistan as a "Country of Particular Concern," pursuant to the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. As a participating State in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Uzbekistan freely committed itself to provide "the freedom of the individual to profess and practice, alone or in community with others, religion or belief." Despite the considerable increase of engagement post September 11th by the United States, many serious concerns remain about Uzbekistan's well-documented record of "particularly severe violations of religious freedom."

Of foremost concern are the roughly 6,000 Muslims, imprisoned on account of their religious beliefs or affiliation. Once incarcerated, many Muslim prisoners are reportedly punished for praying and for fasting during Ramadan. Despite significant pressure from Members of Congress, the U.S. Embassy and international human rights organizations over the past two years, little has been done by Uzbek officials to address the continued detention of these individuals. Although amnesties do occur, they have been criticized for being little more than paroles, and human rights groups continue to report that 6,000 or so persons remain jailed because of their beliefs.

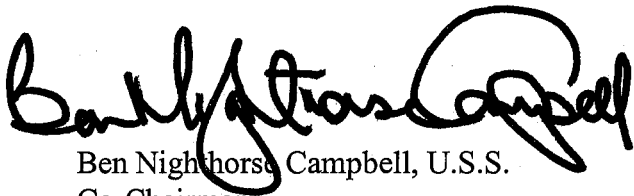
While Uzbekistan has legitimate security concerns stemming from extremist groups, the ongoing reactionary and heavy-handed Uzbek policy is counterproductive and negatively impacts religious freedom for the many peaceful Muslims and Christians wanting to practice their faith within the constitutional framework. From the mid 1990s on, for example, reports have arisen of hundreds of mosques being closed throughout the Fergana Valley and their leaders arrested, creating a serious shortfall of facilities for the large and devout Muslim population in that region. If individuals at mosques are involved in actual criminal activity, the individuals should be punished. But by closing independent mosques that refuse to receive government appointed imams or accept government-approved Friday sermons, entire communities are penalized, and the government only gives further credence to the very movement it is trying to combat, while preventing the exercise of a fundamental freedom.

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Registration is also a problem, as the legal scheme contains burdensome registration requirements with heavy criminal sanctions for groups unable to register, and authorities systematically deny government recognition of independent mosques and unregistered churches. One example indicative of others is the jailing of five Baptists for ten days in August for attending an unregistered church in the Namangan region. These dangers are real, as individuals arrested for attending "illegal" or "prohibited" groups could be sentenced for up to 20 years in prison. In 2003, the Uzbek Government did ask the OSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights to undertake a review of the Uzbek religion law in light of international commitments. Unfortunately, the government has seemingly ignored the report, in an apparent attempt to avoid application of its sound findings.

While these egregious violations of religious freedom are systematic and ongoing, Uzbek reforms in this area are most certainly not. We therefore urge you to send an unequivocal message to the Uzbek Government that its policies and practices constitute "severe violations" of religious freedom by designating it a Country of Particular Concern.


Sincerely,



Ben Nighthorse Campbell, U.S.S.
Co-Chairman



Christopher H. Smith, M.C.
Chairman



Benjamin L. Cardin, M.C.
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